

Utopia in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

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ABSTRACT

Utopia is a universal concept, as manifested by the fact that it has attracted readers of five centuries and has influenced numerous writers. It is obvious that people, recognizing the abundant stupidities, corruptions, and injustice prevalent in their society, should attempt to plan a better system for living together. Whether they can reach such a society or not is the fundamental question found in most Vonnegut's works. The utopian schemes in Vonnegut's works such as the settlement of San Lorenzo in *Cat's Cradle*, almost always backfire, often bringing about more problems than they promise to solve. Therefore, in this paper, it is aimed to emphasize Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* regarding the concepts of utopia and dystopia as well as apocalyptic notions. Apocalypse can be investigated in *Cat's Cradle* and it gives a serious quality to Vonnegut's work. The emptiness of mere survival is painfully described in *Cat's Cradle*, in which the earth is locked in frozen death.

Keywords: utopia; dystopia; apocalypse; Kurt Vonnegut; *Cat's Cradle*

1. INTRODUCTION

The word "utopia" is a comparatively recent word but it has been applied to a great deal of writing written long before it was coined. How did people before More get along without it? In recent years this apparently well-defined genre has been the object of increased study and discussion. As Sayre's suggests, utopias are being re-examined. The many social and political critiques of them all reflect our twentieth-century disillusionment of which the typical literary utopia, from Plato to H. G. Wells, seems so disturbingly a model. As if in reaction, the representative Utopian romances of this century have been the anti-utopias and satiric utopias (sometimes called dystopias) of Zamiatin, Huxley, Orwell, and most recently Kurt Vonnegut. In Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963), for example, one comes across an influential quotation from the "Fourteenth Book of Bokonon" the prophet of the island of "San Lorenzo." The title of this book is "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?" The book is one word: "Nothing" (19). However, on one side and another we hear louder and louder requests that new utopias be written, as if the vision without which the people perish were now a luxury in need of cheaper means of production. Vonnegut himself persuaded his students to write Utopian fiction. The psychiatrist Kenneth Keniston has related the problems of alienated, undecided youth to the absence of valid Utopian aims to which people can devote themselves (233). In the introduction to *Life against Death* (1959), Norman O. Brown wrote that one of the purposes of his book was to revive utopian thinking, which had

been so deeply damaged by the totalitarian outcome of Russian communism. Utopia, in a non-mystical, secular society, has almost the status of religion - the one source of the myths of the ends of life. Where there is no real faith in a life after death; and one of the tendencies we can see in the history of utopian fiction is that it has grown at the same time Christian eschatology has languished (216). Utopian thinking must be done, for we will have some future, just as we will die, whether we want to or not. As Arthur Waskow has pointed out, the latest horror is that if people do not plan for themselves, others will plan for them, meanwhile planning to fit people into the future they have planned (55).

Margaret Atwood's argument of the utopia/dystopia tradition parallels many of Vonnegut's own thoughts related to critics' desire to label him and his work. Atwood's definitions are also suitable for the tradition within which *Cat's Cradle* sits:

Utopias are often satirical, the satire being directed at whatever society the writer is currently living in – that is, the superior arrangements of the Utopians reflect badly on us. Dystopias are often [...] like dire warnings than satires, dark shadows cast by the present into the future. They are what will happen to us if we don't pull up our socks. (94)

2. DISCUSSION

In Vonnegut's universe, it seems that scientists decide about the end of the world. Dr. Hoenikker, the inventor of *ice-nine*, and of course the end of the world, is manifested to the reader as a scientist oblivious to morality; but other scientists and embodiments of attitudes by scientists permeate this novel. These are the most keen moments in the novel – not his often saccharin portrayals of Bokkonism. Scientists, not the Bokkonists, are described as blind to their own stupidity; when Dr. Hoenikker misses a commencement speech, Dr. Breed utters it instead. Sandra explains that “the trouble with the world was,” she continued hesitatingly, “that people were still superstitious instead of scientific. He said if everybody would study science more, there wouldn't be all the trouble there was.” (CC 12)

This claim is utopian. *Cat's Cradle* is relevant today – possibly even more than when Vonnegut wrote and published it – one of these portrayals of scientists in the novel is that “science is magic that works [...] I am a very bad scientist. I will do anything to make a human being feel better, even if it's unscientific. No scientist worthy of the name could say such a thing” (CC 83).

The scientists of Vonnegut's novel are blind to moral basis; blinded because of their own faith in science as “magic that works” (83) and in science as an ideology higher than respecting the grandeur of any human. The faith in the effect and truth of science in *Cat's Cradle* is the easiest faith to fall into. Nearly every character is a part of the group and the mass blind following of the text of science receives a relatively massive reduction to absurdity:

“I'm sick of people misunderstanding what a scientist is, what a scientist does...Here and shockingly few other places in this country, men are paid to increase knowledge, to work toward no end but that.”
 “That's very generous of General Forge and Foundry Company.”
 “Nothing generous about it. New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become” (CC 17).

If *Cat's Cradle* as a dystopian novel presents, as Atwood states, "a dire warning," that warning is related to fundamentalist scientists – ones the same as those identified by Chris Hedges in *I Don't Believe in Atheists* (2008):

The blustering televangelists, and the atheists who rant about the evils of religion, are little more than carnival barkers. They are in show business, and those in show business know complexity does not sell. [...] These antagonists each claim to have discovered an absolute truth. They trade absurdity for absurdity. They show that the danger is not religion or science. The danger is *fundamentalism itself*. (32)

Obviously this is the danger Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* offers; something we confront in the contemporary era. In the more extensive public discourse of the twenty-first century, Americans are still easily drawn to a simplistic conflict between religious and scientific fundamentalists. Maybe Vonnegut would say "So it goes," about such a conflict in the world as he is patient and the optimistic in some cases.

Cat's Cradle is set in a future which is too much like our present. It is a novel about "the day the world ended," which is in fact the title of the book that the narrator, Jonah, starts to write, except that *The Day the World Ended* was assumed to be a Christian description of what important Americans like Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the bomb's inventors, were doing on the day the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima; whereas *Cat's Cradle* turns out to be a Bokononist description of the way the whole world actually ends. Bokonon is the pronunciation given the name Johnson in the English dialect of San Lorenzo, a small island dictatorship in the Caribbean. And Johnson is the surname of a black Episcopalian from Tobago who with Earl McCabe, a United States marine deserter, makes an effort to convert the island of San Lorenzo into a utopia. Johnson had for some time been developing the conviction that "someone was trying to get him somewhere for some reason" (CC 41), so when he and McCabe landed on San Lorenzo trying to reach Miami, they decided to take charge of the pitiful island.

Kurt Vonnegut's novels and stories are not only full of artists but also failed utopian dreamers who try to make the world a better place, at least for a little while. Most of these figures are male, for instance the religious prophet Bokonon of *Cat's Cradle*, who invents a new religion so that a group of downtrodden Caribbean islanders become like actors "employed full time [...] in a play they understood" (CC 66).

One can find out, below the surface of the novel, many of Vonnegut's nostalgias: an enthusiasm for the mundane paradise, a glorification of an ideal familial love, the hopeless hope for a rational utopia, and a profoundly personal identification with the ironically successful prophet, Jonah. From Harold Bloom's point of view, Bokononism is certainly more an ironic humanism than it is a spirituality. Vonnegut's purpose is not to show Bokononism as another pragmatic nihilism. Its mystery is in *karass*, with the indication that almost anyone can belong to one's soul-family. "Ye must love one another," is Vonnegut's strong belief, which transcends irony. *Cat's Cradle* may seem too funny to be an atonement, but that is the achievement of Vonnegut's art. A Jonah who can move us to laughter is a valuable resource, perhaps our ironist (2).

Cat's Cradle can be considered as a novel of discovery of purpose, and the purpose itself is manifested through the humorous interplay of science and religion which is considerably black. While researching his book, Jonah also discovers that before Felix Hoenikker died he had invented, ice-nine, a crystal with a melting point of one hundred and thirty degrees Fahrenheit, capable of freezing over the whole world, but mercifully developed simply to solidify swamps for invading Marines. While in Ilium making this blissful discovery, Jonah has

his first "sudden, very personal shove in the direction of Bokononism" (CC 28) when he sees a stone angel under mistletoe in a tombstone salesroom. This vin-dit, as the shove is called, is also his first indication about the aim of karass. At the end of the book, which is also the end of the world, Jonah dreams of climbing Mount McCabe "with some magnificent symbol and planting it there" (CC 108). He understands that his karass has been working "night and day for maybe half a million years to get [him] up that mountain" (CC 108). It is Bokonon himself, sitting on a rock and composing the final sentence of The Books of Bokonon. Jonah reads this on a piece of paper Bokonon hands him:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (CC 109)

Robert Scholes summarizes his reading of Vonnegut's observation on science and religion in this fascinating aphorism: "As the scientist finds the truth that kills, the prophet looks for a saving lie" (8). Obviously, the organizing principle in *Cat's Cradle* is an opposition between science and religion. Vonnegut's critique of science and religion in *Cat's Cradle* shows a sort of battle-like discussion, with different figures in motion to point out the absurdity, but also necessity, of the human condition at the end of the world.

On the other hand, *Cat's Cradle* is concerned with apocalypse. Referring to the latter book, Vonnegut once implied how at home he has been forced to become the modern notion of apocalypse: "I myself once staged the end of the world on two pieces of paper -- at a cost of less than a penny, including wear and tear on my typewriter ribbon and the seat of my pants. Think of that" (*Palm Sunday* 163).

Cat's Cradle uses the notion of apocalypse as the end of time, or the end of history. The linear motion of history is seen to end in this novel. The novel foregrounds science as one discourse among others; science destroys the world and human life. A religious discourse, as parodied in *Cat's Cradle*, might also indicate that apocalypse is part of a linear progression. However, in *Cat's Cradle*, religion is clearly presented, in Vonnegut's epigraph, as "foma," that is, a set of "harmless untruths", or comforting lies. Actually, both science and religion function as foma here: science is presented as creative progress, yet leads to complete destruction (a direct line is drawn from the first use of the atomic bomb to the apocalypse caused by *ice-nine*), while religion, even an intentionally made one like Bokononism, cannot solve the problems of poor peoples' lives. What constitutes the end of the world may be a point of discussion, however, and the narrator of *Cat's Cradle* sets out to write a book called *The Day the World Ended*, intended as "an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan" (CC 4). In this sense, the world ends when it is basically changed: time continues but the world we know does not.

An apocalyptic story of destruction caused by the invention of the extraordinary weapon *ice-nine*, a thinly veiled metaphor for the atomic bomb, *Cat's Cradle* was a critical success, earning praises from such well-known writers as Graham Greene, who adored the book as one of the three best novels of the year, and American novelist Terry Southern, who wrote a complimentary review in the *New York Times*, which concluded with the following paragraph: "*Cat's Cradle* is an irreverent and often highly entertaining fantasy concerning the playful irresponsibility of nuclear scientists. [...] it is work of a far more engaging and meaningful order than the melodramatic tripe which most critics seem to consider "serious.""

Dr. Felix Hoenikker at the request of a Marine general who wants a method of freezing ground so that military troops can travel more easily, invented ice-nine as a doomsday device. After the doctor's death, his children, Angela, Frank, and Newt Hoenikker, divide the ice-nine among themselves. They trade the technology for either love or position. When Frank's portion of the ice-nine, which he had traded to Papa Monzano on the island of San Lorenzo in exchange for a political appointment, is accidentally released into the ocean surrounding the island, all water on Earth freezes, causing an apocalyptic natural disease. Only a small group of San Lorenzans survive the catastrophe and become the last remaining people on Earth at the end of the novel.

San Lorenzo's dictator says that "science is the strongest thing there is," (CC 56) and names Franklin Hoenikker the next president of the island because he has science. When H. Lowe Crosby, who has moved his bicycle factory to San Lorenzo after suffering nothing but disloyalty from his employees in Chicago, learns that Bokonon, the leader of the island's practiced religion, is against science, he asks: "how can anybody in his right mind be against science?" (CC 89). And Crosby's wife immediately adds, "I'd be dead right now if it wasn't for penicillin" (CC 89). Science and technology can indeed do wonderful things, and *Cat's Cradle* prospects the power religion has to deceive, as the narrator of the novel mentions, "nothing in this book is true" (CC 1). The reader is told how sequential generations of San Lorenzo leaders, mostly the dictator 'Papa' Monzano, elected to preserve the old system of Bokononism in order to develop a climate of submissiveness in which it is easier to control the population: "the belief that God was running my life and that He had work for me to do. And inwardly, I *sarooned*, which is to say that I acquiesced to the seeming demands of my *vin-dit*" (CC 77). While *Cat's Cradle* critiques religion, and the way in which the authorities use it as a tool to deceive the people, the novel seems to mention that science has an even greater potential for misuse.

Cat's Cradle represents the present, inhumane direction of scientific development as having extremely negative reactions for the welfare of the human race, reminding us of the Marcusean suggestion that "science and technology [. . .] have to change their present direction and goals; they [. . .] have to be reconstructed in accord with a new sensibility – the demands of the life instincts" (19). Felix, in particular, exemplifies a system that attempts for an ever increasing technological improvement without thinking about the moral and ethical reactions. Felix is clever enough to be "one of the chief creators of the [atomic] bomb" (CC 5) yet does not remember anything about his dead wife: "I remember one time, about a year before he died, I tried to get him to tell me something about my mother. He couldn't remember anything about her" (CC 8).

Cat's Cradle is not to be read as a neo-luddite accusation of science. Rather, Vonnegut is warning of the apocalyptic results of the too much praise of science and technology and of course the fact that science and technology have distanced from a sense of moral responsibility. Joel Kovel in his penetrating study of the ubiquitous nuclear state writes:

That the atomic age has sounded the limits of the dream of technological progress does not imply an abandonment of science and technology or a return to paleolithic conditions. To abandon science is to abandon human power as it has evolved over millennia. The antinuclear struggle is a fight for human power. Why sacrifice so much of the goal in advance? What we are against is not human power, but power over humanity, the machine as an instrument of domination. Therefore the goal is not to abandon science but to rescue it from technocracy. (214)

We might think that an apocalypse would offer a clear conclusion, but *Cat's Cradle* ends with a possible final sentence in *The Books of Bokonon*. Bokonon tells the narrator, "the time for the final sentence has come" (CC 109), and the novel stops after this quotation, disappearing traditional conclusion.

Ryan Morse indicates that *Cat's Cradle* established a vocabulary for theoretical utopias and the practical use of these ideas. These utopias fall under the category of "foma," or harmless untruths, which can be used to unite a population and even maintain them through periods of misery. The basis of foma can be found in the followers of Bokononism, a religion expressly founded on lies. In the novel, the citizens of San Lorenzo persist under a cruel regime and through intolerable poverty in a state of general peace and harmony due to these various foma found in the texts of Bokonon. The narrator himself becomes very interested in the religion and experiences; what can just be called a transformation by the end of the book. The focus of the religion and the novel is the actions of one's karass, especially that of the narrator's, and how those actions bring about some kind of advantages desired by a higher being. A karass solves this everlasting problem of loneliness by associating a large group of people that have nearly no connection to one another through some goals of destiny.

The real – world indication of such an idea is the notion that "foma" can in fact help solve loneliness in the real world, where people can unite around ideas besides their truth value. These theoretical utopias become the foma for a variety of movements and groups that all have a common purpose in mind, and give them something to look forward to or to hope for (31).

The society of *Cat's Cradle* is unhealthy due to the fact that it is based upon gross inequalities between different groups in society. The novel also gives evidence that Vonnegut believes that the capitalist society in which he lived could be considered a dystopia because it was founded upon this same, equally unhealthy principle.

Jonah goes to San Lorenzo with his script of *The Day the World Ended* left unfinished. A magazine had asked him to write about an American millionaire who founded a hospital for the poor on the island. Surprisingly, he soon finds out that the middle sibling of the Hoenikkers, who went missing after his father's funeral is now the Minister of Science and Progress in San Lorenzo. In fact, Franklin bought himself this job by giving his share of ice-nine to the dictatorial president, "Papa" Monzano. It is on the plane that Jonah meets Newton and Angela, who are on the way to take part in the celebration of Franklin's engagement to Monzano's adopted daughter and his designation as the next president.

Surrounded by the Caribbean, this third-world nation was founded as part of a utopian experiment. Jonah learns from a history book that in 1922 Lionel Boyd Johnson, a black born in Tobago, was shipwrecked on the way to Miami; he reached the post-colonial island in the company of a "brilliant, self-educated, idealistic Marine deserter" named Earl McCabe (CC 42). They tried to play "Prospero on the disease-ridden island that had been dominated by Castle Sugar and the Catholic Church" by converting it into a utopia (Vanderbilt 148). McCabe changed the island's economic and legal systems, while Johnson, whose name was pronounced "Bokonon" by the natives, designed the new religion. McCabe's first attempt at socialism turned out to be completely wrong for San Lorenzo as the overpopulated nation's earnings was "between six and seven dollars" per person (CC 52). As a result, they finally became dependent on a theatrical device called "Dynamic Tension": "a living legend of the cruel tyrant in the city and the gentle holy man in the jungle" (CC 66). All the island's inhabitants believe in Bokononism, while the tyrant, himself a Bokononist, constantly threatens to execute Bokonon. After McCabe's death, "Papa" Monzano took his place and ruled San Lorenzo with an adopted daughter, Mona Aamons. Monzano, now on his deathbed, chooses Franklin, "the blood son of Dr. Felix Hoenikker" as the next president (CC 33).

Utopian as it is, San Lorenzo is not independent: it is in fact dominated by America. As a poor country with limited resources, it depended on speculation by American investors and visits by tourists. The utopian experiment is based on the assumed equality of people, mirroring the American founding myth. It might even be supposed that this imaginary island is part of the United States in the Cold War era with its policy of “pitting good against evil” (CC. 40) and postponing the final solution by a device of narration.

Papa persuades Jonah and Franklin to teach the people science: “Science is magic that works” (CC 83). At this point, Jonah dreams of bringing “a sort of millennium” to the island with the help of Bokonon (CC 86). Ironically, his utopian dream is never to be: Papa commits suicide by swallowing a piece of ice-nine; “now I will destroy the whole world” (CC 90). In the subsequent air show accident, the palace with Papa’s frozen body collapses into the sea, literally bringing about the world’s end.

It is significant that on the plane to San Lorenzo, Jonah hears a woman say: “Americans [. . .] are forever searching for love in forms it never takes, in places it can never be. It must have something to do with the vanished frontier” (CC 38). In traveling from New York to the utopian island of San Lorenzo, Jonah symbolizes American expansion. After the world actually ends, however, Jonah converts to Bokononism and leaves his utopianism; instead, he begins to dream of “climbing Mount McCabe with some magnificent symbol and planting it there” (CC 108).

The narrator of the novel becomes President of the pseudo-paradise of San Lorenzo and marries Mona, the most beautiful woman on the island. The narrator of *Cat’s Cradle* is robbed of everything, and, since all life on earth is destroyed, redemption is impossible. *Cat’s Cradle* denies the possibility of any redemption, Christian, Bokononist, or otherwise.

The tragic and fatal effects of enlightened progress in *Cat’s Cradle* come down to the inevitable and obvious unhappiness or uselessness of most people. The country that was meant to be a Utopia has not only become a dystopia for so many of its inhabitants, but it has done so directly by virtue of processes put into motion through the principles that were assumed to make America a Utopia in the first place, that is, freedom and opportunity.

By having a quick look at the introduction of *Cat’s Cradle*, one can find, implied, shows the idea of a frozen future – fictional action bounded by death. The future perfect mode figures prominently on the first page of *Cat’s Cradle*:

The book was to be factual.

The book was to be an account of . . .

It was to be a Christian book [it] was the book I never finished, the book to be called The Day the World Ended (CC 3- 4).

Vonnegut determines the sense of fatality that looms over its use: “somebody or something has compelled me to be in certain places at certain times” (CC 3).

Apocalyptic endings and fantastic events both point up man’s apparent lack of control over his environment and his destiny. But rather than lamenting this fact, the novel suggests that we might be better off controlling less rather than more. *Cat’s Cradle* illustrates this idea principally negatively. Vonnegut’s novel builds with the aid of comedy but without the relief of joyous magic towards the disastrous consequence of man’s desire to invent and to control. The novel’s society has in a sense gone beyond the point where control seems desirable. Perhaps it manifests a kind of late romanticism, a post-frontier mentality. Civilization is winning too easily over the natural world and it turns out to be equal in many respects to barbarism.

The novel attacks the insane tendency to carry things – war and progress, in particular – too far. In this process, the means take over the ends. Ice-nine, designed as a weapon to protect

one region, ends up destroying it as, we are meant to conclude, our highly valued atomic bomb may do. A smaller example of the tendency of inventions to overpower their inventors occurs when the inhabitants of an elegant mansion in San Lorenzo are “awakened by a series of bangs and a flood of light” (CC 73). These turn out to come “from a radio, from an electric dishwasher, from a pump – all restored to noisy life by the return of electric power,” but not before giving all of the people involved a good scare (CC 73). *Cat's Cradle* is a more clear reaction to the 20th century's worship of science. It satirizes people who believe they can understand, can control everything, and survive the world's mysteries. H. Lowe Crosby asks “how can anybody in his right mind be against science” and his wife Hazel adds, “I'd be dead now if it wasn't for penicillin” (CC 89). In the next chapter, called “Pain Killer,” Papa Monzano becomes “the first man in history to die of ice-nine” (CC 90). The presence of Bokonon's writings gets one up on people who believe they can control the future, for Bokonon will always have been there before them, and suggests that fate, not they, may rule the world. The coincidental location of Vonnegut's island shows us an outsider's view of a typical Latin American country with all the clichés – a dictator and his progeny, a one-crop economy, a one-city nation, and a rich American's view of “the people of San Lorenzo,” who “are interested in only three things: fishing, fornication, and Bokonism” (CC 89).

The novel uses the device of an isolated realm where magical events take place without problematical contact with real places. This kind of setting allows for the use of what we might term the “man-from-Mars” technique. A real life situation is seen as if with fresh eyes, and our world is called into question. Typically, in *Cat's Cradle*, the process constitutes social criticism: “Bokonon had been there, too, had written a whole book about utopias [. . .] which he called “Bokonon's Republic.” [. . .] Let us start our Republic with a chain of drug stores, a chain of grocery stores, a chain of gas chambers, and a national game. After that, we can write our Constitution” (CC 108).

The cat's cradle is the construction of an artifice over a void; for the version that the narrator's father tries to amuse him with on the day the bomb went off is made from a piece of string that was originally tied around a book sent to Hoenikker by a prisoner, a book about the destruction of the world by a bomb, and which Hoenikker had never read. It is very funny, even playful, but it is strung over the horror of nuclear war. It needs to be funny, in order to be suitable reading for “people who are dying or in terrible pain” (CC 59).

When Dr. Hoenikker “got so interested in turtles that he stopped working on the bomb,” the directors of the project took away the turtles: “Father never said a word about the disappearance of the turtles. He just came to work the next day and looked for things to play with and think about, and everything there was to play with and think about had something to do with the bomb” (CC 8).

The bomb and ice-nine are not cat's cradles, but Dr. Hoenikker cannot see the difference. Near the end of the novel, the narrator thinks to himself: “What hope can there be for mankind, [. . .] when there are such men as Felix Hoenikker to give such playthings as ice-nine to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are?” (CC 93)

Cat's Cradle tacitly acknowledges that one source of violence may be exterior; political and social reality engender violence of language and action, and may lead towards universal destruction. This specific historical context lessens the risk of the kind of programmatic fantasy. In the United States, this linking of fantasy and history is often recognized in the works of Barthelme, Pynchon, Coover, and Vonnegut. In the novel Vonnegut sees “the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it” (CC 107). Vonnegut works insistently to challenge how we perceive reality. Jerome Klinkowitz explains in *Structuring the Void* (1992) that Vonnegut's anthropological study “convinced him that

reality was something arbitrary and impermanent, since the basic facts of life could be changed by circumstances of birth or by the whims of national economics even after one was half-grown" (37).

Vonnegut arouses the claim that reality is drastic and cruel; the best one can do is to make light of it. In the novel, by fully involving in foma it is possible for the characters to accept the things with their own unconscious fantasy that their conscious mind would have them cope with through repression. As claimed by Chris Hedges, in both *American Fascists* (2007) and *I Don't Believe in Atheists* (2008), human discourse and thinking are run by "crisis rhetoric" that is assisted by our innate "utopian thinking". Both "crisis rhetoric" and "utopian thinking" contribute to our sense of desperation, to our seeing failure at every turn; the world in reality simply can never fulfill our idealized hopes, so leaving us always in crisis.

In his apocalypse, *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut had clearly referred to the hopelessness that comes from considering the human condition over a million years – the Fourteenth Book of Bokonon, titled "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?," contains only one word: "Nothing." But three decades later, and a million years later, Vonnegut finds some hope for mankind after all.

Bokononism in the novel is really a kind of world in which we must soldier on, hoping against hope. Vonnegut's shifts in his vision of life and death, hope and despair are really notable. The play between Vonnegut's hopeful movement toward the light and his inflexible and certain representing of the dark shows the core of his artistic world. Never is his vision complete; no single work completely embraces a vision of hope or despair.

What is observable, repeatedly, in Vonnegut's fiction is individual action without ultimate significance but desperately laden with personal meaning. The actions are imagined attempts, but will, in no way, alter the forces of human history. Individuals try to evolve toward significance and value, but history continually intrudes and reduces human aspiration to nothing more than static posturing. Bokonon, the prophet-revolutionary of *Cat's Cradle*, attempts to preach a paradoxical doctrine of creative lies so as to lift the poverty of the island of San Lorenzo into the sphere of imaginative play. The game of Bokononism heightens one's interest in life and even lends provisional meaning to human activity. Unfortunately, Bokonon, the life-affirming inventor, is matched against the effects of a life-denying inventor, Dr. Felix Hoenikker, who is one of the "fathers" of the A-bomb. The very metaphor "father" tells the whole grotesque story: Hoenikker "fathers" and then ice-nine destroys, while Bokonon tries to create meaning and to give provisions and interest to human life.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In *Cat's Cradle* we see the faults of mankind through his belief in false truths like religion. Vonnegut mentions that many of the things we believe in are almost certainly not true. He thinks that too many people simply accept ideas as being truths. He wants his readers to question society and their beliefs that are not backed up by logical reasoning. For example, religion is not founded on any scientific premises and Vonnegut thinks we should question why so many people believe in it. As a result, in this novel, all the things had been done to make San Lorenzo a utopia, lead it to dystopia. As Schulz writes:

Cat's Cradle is a novel about the varieties of truth available to man: scientific, religious, political, social, economic, and humanistic. Ultimately, in its presentation of the open-ended, unconformable dilemma of human knowledge and wisdom, the novel sardonically blurs veracity and falsehood, treating them

as interchangeable for all practical human purposes. It refuses to confirm what reality is. (348)

The intertwining of machinery, humans, and existentialism is a familiar knot for Vonnegut. David Morse in his “We are Marching to Utopia” writes about *Cat’s Cradle* that “Vonnegut cannot reflect upon the role of technology in the twentieth century without also reflecting on human metaphysical anguish” (24). Vonnegut’s characters are often asked to make unbelievable adaptations to hardship, but their successful evolution depends on the ability to derive survivability from a purposeful clarity, from an alive confirmation of purpose based on their individual narratives.

As a result, Vonnegut is not trying to change the future in his novel. He knows that despite his attempts, there will still be more wars, and more dependence on science in a destroying way. Yet, what he offers is a way to survive it with rationality, through the use of the imagination. That Tralfamadore is in fact a “supreme fiction,” a product of the imagination, and that Vonnegut emphasizes using the imagination as a method of survival are clear from his concentration on the value of works of art, especially in the novels from *Cat’s Cradle* on.

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